

“The Secret to Being a Church”

Romans 12:9-21 • Genesis 18:1-16

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • August 28, 2016

The Christian faith is often described as a journey. We talk about our *walk* with Christ because being a Christian is a day-by-day—and sometimes moment-by-moment—process of learning and growing. We don’t just become a Christian one day and then that’s it. We must be actively engaged in our faith. So a natural question would be how do we measure our progress? How do we know if we are really progressing in our faith? Similarly, how do we measure how we’re doing as a church?

Well it seems to me that in both cases Romans 12 is a pretty good place to look. As you read this passage, try inserting “I” or “We” in front of each statement and see if it’s true. I let love be genuine. We abhor what is evil and hold fast what is good. We love one another with brotherly affection. We outdo one another in showing honor. I serve the Lord. I contribute to the needs of the saints and I seek to show hospitality. You get the point. We can measure our hearts by comparing them to God’s design for our lives.

This morning I want to especially talk about one of these – hospitality. What does hospitality mean to you? When you hear the word “hospitality,” what image does that bring to mind? Many of us, I suspect, think of Martha Stewart, who has been called “queen” of hospitality. We think of her perfect place-settings and creative center pieces. You can picture the elaborately set table, just waiting for some dinner party. But as we look at what the Bible says about Christian Hospitality, we find that Martha Stewart didn’t invent hospitality and she hasn’t even perfected it. In fact, I suspect that if you showed up uninvited at her mansion near Bar Harbor, Maine, it wouldn’t be hospitality that you would experience.

But Christian hospitality is much more than fine china and tablecloths. According to the Bible, hospitality is not some set of actions, like preparing a meal or setting the table a certain way. Hospitality in both the Old and New Testaments is a way of life. So what exactly *is*

hospitality? For starters, a better translation of the original Greek would be to pursue or “run after” loving strangers. Hospitality has to do with the way we welcome other people.

We don’t have time this morning to look at everything the Bible tells us about hospitality, but the story from Genesis 18 gives us a great example of hospitality in the ancient world. We find Abraham sitting in the door of his tent during the afternoon heat when he sees three men. I would be suspicious. But Abraham jumps up and runs out to meet them, begging them to stop and spend some time with him.

When the strangers agree to stop, Abraham runs to Sarah and has her make some fresh bread while he fixes these strangers Veal Parmesan. Then when it was time for the strangers to leave, Abraham walks with them for a ways to “set them on their way.”

As it turns out, these strangers that Abraham was welcoming were angels or messengers from God. Hebrews 13:2 says, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” Over and over again in the Old Testament God commands the Israelites to remember what it was like to be aliens or strangers in Egypt. For example, Exodus 23:9 says, “You shall not oppress a sojourner. You know the heart of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.”

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul shows us that this idea of being foreigners is a spiritual concept, not just physical. Ephesians 2:12 says, “remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.”¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”

This helps us to understand biblical hospitality. It is closely related to the hospitality that God extends to us. The way we practice true hospitality will be the result of how we

understand God's hospitality towards us. Because of sin, we are separated from God, foreigners. But because of Jesus, God welcomes us and treats us far better than we deserve.

So let me share with you four key concepts of biblical hospitality and some practical ways that we can pursue Christian Hospitality in our own lives. First, Christian hospitality, as given to us in the Bible, is a sacred *process* of receiving outsiders and changing them from strangers into guests and from guests to family.

Hospitality is the way that we invite people into our lives so that they can experience Jesus for themselves and hopefully be transformed into followers of Christ. By inviting them to church, we are inviting them into our fellowship so that they will be exposed to the Word of God and discover for themselves their need for a savior. Likewise, when we invite them into our homes, we are inviting them to see Christianity in action.

Second, hospitality is not some specialized spiritual gift that only some people possess. Instead, every Christian is called to the ministry of hospitality. In 1 Peter 4:9 we're told to show hospitality without complaining and as we saw in Romans 12:13, we are to be diligent in welcoming people and showing hospitality.

The third key concept of biblical hospitality is that there is an important moral component to it. By addressing the physical needs of others, such as food, shelter and protection, we are actually affirming their value. "Historically, Christian hospitality was a subversive act that obliterated societal barriers such as gender, race, economic condition and citizenship status." Is it possible that today Christian hospitality could once again be a joyful, subversive answer to other crises in our society, like loneliness, isolation, and the devaluing of human life? Real hospitality requires us to be involved in people's lives and that they be involved in ours.

And fourth, Christian hospitality cannot be separated from the coming of God's Kingdom, both now and at the end of history. In Jesus Christ, we are invited to participate in the

Kingdom of God, which the Bible frequently describes in terms of a feast or banquet with God himself as the generous host.

So what about you? How can you practice biblical hospitality in your own life? There's an old saying, "charity begins at home." I think we can modify that just a little and say that hospitality begins at home. As Christians, we should be welcoming "strangers" into our homes. Does that mean opening our homes to our friends and family is not hospitality? Actually, by strangers we mean people who are strangers from God. Many of those people are, in fact, very close family or friends. Remember, the goal of hospitality is to expose them to Christ through our own lives.

Get to know your neighbors, the staff at your doctor's office, the employees at the grocery store. Begin by learning and remembering peoples' names. By intentionally building a relationship with the people you come in contact with on a regular basis, you are practicing hospitality and working to eliminate loneliness, which is an epidemic these days.

Of course food is an important part of hospitality. Look for ways to share meals with people, whether at a restaurant or in your home. When you eat with people there is a kind of bond that is created and it sends the message that you value the other person.

Finally, invite people to experience the fellowship of our congregation. When guests visit our church, make an effort to meet them and make them feel welcome. That means paying attention to our guests. Invite them to lunch. Call them during the week. Find ways to help them get connected by building relationships. One of the best ways to build relationships is in small groups so consider hosting or leading a small group Bible study in your home or even in a coffee shop. Get creative. The idea is to create a place where people feel comfortable and are able to build relationships.

I think the best way to describe hospitality is summed up by the saying on a napkin holder my grandmother had when I was growing up. It

said, “We’re happy to share with you such as we’ve got, the leaks in the roof and the soup in the pot.” Unlike Martha Stewart’s view of hospitality, biblical hospitality isn’t about having the nicest table setting, it’s about having people with you around the table. It’s about

sharing what you’ve got, whatever it is. It’s about sharing your life. And it’s about sharing the Kingdom of God with people who need it most.

Amen.